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Records in seized plane probed for Contra link

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Senate investigators probing the Iran-Contra scandal have examined records found in a DC-4 aircraft seized in a Florida drug case for links to gun smuggling by the Nicaraguan resistance.

Documents found on board the plane, which Drug Enforcement Administration sources said yesterday may have been used in cocaine smuggling, have linked it to arms purchases by Contra leader Adolfo Calero in possible violation of U.S. law, according to a police investigator.

"There was military equipment on board the aircraft," said Detective Ron Bellamy of the Charlotte County, Fla., sheriff's office. "There were bills of lading that indicated weapons were being shipped, and Adolfo Calero's name was on the books," Mr. Bellamy said.

According to Mr. Bellamy, "We are investigating possible violations of the neutrality law." That law prohibits American citizens from selling arms to the Nicaraguan resistance.

Mr. Calero's attorney in Miami said he had no information about the aircraft seizure. Mr. Calero is in Honduras and could not be reached for comment.

The plane was confiscated at an airfield in Charlotte County in late March. DEA agents called into the case believe the plane was bought in 1985 by a drug ring that was busted that year.

Eighteen people, including a Miami lawyer named Garrick Wallace, were indicted in April 1985 on charges of smuggling 1,800 pounds of cocaine, according to DEA sources.

The cocaine ring had set up a dummy company called Skymaster for buying planes to use in the drug deals, officials said. The DC-4 seized in Charlotte County had been bought by Skymaster, according to Mr. Bellamy.

The DEA has been looking for the aircraft since 1985 as part of the booty from the busted drug ring, sources said.

"We'd been looking for the plane for a year and a half," said a DEA official. "Our interest is strictly from the standpoint of a drug investigation."

Sources said the plane at the time it was confiscated apparently was owned by a Florida pilot named Frank Moss. Law enforcement officials from three agencies said Mr. Moss was under investigation for drug smuggling. He has not been charged.

"There is a lot of intelligence gathered on Moss," said one source. Another source said a grand jury in Miami will begin hearing evidence this month accusing Mr. Moss of cocaine smuggling.

At the same time, the U.S. Customs Service in Miami had sought the plane in connection

with a probe of gunrunning into Honduras, according to a law enforcement source.

Mr. Bellamy said the Customs Service had sent agents to talk with him about the contents of the aircraft.

David Hoover, a spokesman for the Customs Service in Washington, said he was not aware of any continuing Customs Service investigation into gunsmuggling that involved the DC-4 confiscated in Florida.

Mr. Bellamy said at the time the plane was confiscated there were no drugs aboard.

But what he did find led him to conclude the aircraft was used to smuggle arms.

The plane's contents also raised questions for the investigators probing the Iran-Contra scandal.

According to a spokesman for the Senate select committee, which is scheduled to begin hearings May 5 into Iranian arms sales and diversion of funds to the Contras, investigators have examined the plane's contents. The spokesman refused to comment on them.

A source on the House Judiciary Committee's crime subcommittee, which has been investigating charges of Contra gun and drug smuggling, said that subcommittee is aware of the plane and its contents and that it planned to soon send an investigator to Florida to review the documents.

Meanwhile, a federal judge yesterday turned down an attempt by the Senate select committee to force retired Air Force Maj. Gen. Richard Secord to sign over access to Swiss bank accounts investigators believe would help trace the money trail from Iran arms sales to Central America.

U.S. District Court Judge Aubrey Robinson said forcing Gen. Secord to sign a waiver releasing the banking records could violate constitutional constraints against self-incrimination.

"In the matter at hand, the court need not resort to conjecture to determine how the communication sought from Secord could potentially incriminate him," Judge Robinson said in his nine-page ruling.

"The court would be completely ignoring reality if it were to say that Secord's signature on the consent directive were not potentially incriminating," he said.

The committee will seek an expedited appeal from the federal appellate court in Washington overturning Judge Robinson's decision, said Lance Morgan, a spokesman for the committee.

"[Judge Robinson] disagreed with three other courts of appeal which have held that direction to sign such a consent did not violate any Fifth Amendment rights," said Mr. Morgan.

He said the committee would continue to gather evidence on Gen. Secord's activities through "other sources" while the appeal proceeded.